

## **BILDUNG AND YOUNG NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF SCHOLARLY EDUCATION**

In Nietzsche's earlier writings, a considerable amount of thought engages the tasks of constructing an educational ideal and developing a critique of contemporary scholarly institutions, along with corresponding ways to think about education. The peculiar form this concern assumes does not emerge out of Nietzsche as out of a void: it originates from a well-established tradition in German educational thought – a tradition crystallized in the very German concept of *Bildung*.

In the educational realm, *Bildung* points to an ideal of all-around and harmonious individual development. However, before it gained this meaning, the notion was already used by Leibniz, Böhme and Paracelsus as a category of natural philosophy. According to this pre-educational meaning, *Bildung* referred to the process of development through which a living being achieves the outward form proper to the mature individual of the species. As a concept of natural philosophy, *Bildung* was deeply intertwined with an idea of natural teleology which postulated in nature an order revealed through the visibly goal-oriented striving of the living being. *Bildung* itself denoted the organism's physical development whenever it occurred according to this natural order.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers like Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt became instrumental in the expansion of the semantical domain covered by the concept of *Bildung*. The notion then ceased to exclusively stand for the physical development of living beings and came to denote the intellectual development of human beings. At this point, *Bildung* enters the realm of education. However, as it acquires an educational meaning, the concept retains its original connection to natural, healthy and proper development. This enduring association with an idea of nature Rousseau invested with ideal value allowed Germans to oppose *Bildung* to education proper (*Erziehung*). While *Bildung* systematically embodies an ideal kind of education, *Erziehung* is compatible with the taming or domestication of individual forces prompted by an appeal to social cohesion or submission to the state. That is, while *Bildung* always refers to an education in harmony with individual and human nature, one can speak of *Erziehung* as an unnatural process bending individual personality to foreign rules and codes and eventually leading the individual on a path of corruption – his own.

Thinking of *Bildung*, one thinks away this harmful potential of education, an abstraction which grants *Bildung* a certain moral "thickness". Just as a good form of cruelty is morally impossible, so is an educationally impotent or harmful *Bildung*. Proper education, that is, education which would be *Bildung* through and through, would focus on the total unfolding, on the one hand, of generic human capacities and, on the other, of powers particular to the individual. The original thrust of *Bildung* in natural philosophy is thus retained in philosophy of education, although in a somewhat altered manner. In education as much as in nature, *Bildung* would indicate the individual's path towards completeness, maturity and perfection. An educative process worthy to be christened *Bildung* would therefore intend to make human beings what they ought to be *qua* human beings and *qua* individuals.

Young Nietzsche takes part in the German *Bildungstradition* as a polemist set out to measure the educational practices and institutions of his time to the ideal meaning congealed in this German term. Through Humboldt's work as head of the Prussian department of education, *Bildung* was eventually made the official objective to be pursued by the educational institutions of his time. Nietzsche took grudge at this endorsement because he thought it allowed institutions to profit from the powerful rhetoric associated with the concept itself, although they miserably failed at living up to its standards. Through this shift in usage which permitted, from this association onward, to use *Bildung* to

denote what actually goes on in Gymnasiums and Universities, Nietzsche thought one was divesting a noble ideal of its regulative nature and tainted it with traces of a contemptible reality. Among the many nietzschean critiques aiming at results of this unhappy association, the most famous is the critique historical culture<sup>1</sup> (*historische Bildung*).

In order to grasp how historical culture could represent, for Nietzsche, a degenerate version of *Bildung*, we have to grasp in what respect the English "culture" is just as improper a term of translation as would be "education" when one needs to preserve the rich philosophical tradition contained in the German. The core of the problem resides in what is generally thought by means of the concept of culture when it becomes an attribute of the individual. When one thinks about culture in this sense, one thinks about a sum of knowledge gained by the individual through study or social intercourse. Thus, culture is rather foreign to the individual in question. One is not one's culture. With *Bildung*, however, the educative process is thought to penetrate to the core of the person educated. Any *Bildung* should always consist in both harmonisation and expression of the forces present in the individual and not in a process through which knowledge is merely piled on without bringing a change in the identity of the learner. Or, to say it in the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt :

... if in our language we say *Bildung*, we mean something both higher and more inward, namely the attitude of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavour, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character.<sup>2</sup>

In speaking of *Bildung*, thinkers like Humboldt therefore intended to single out the all-important stuff of general education: a deep change occurring within the person educated. The profound effect *Bildung* should have on the individual's inner life was to materialize in the individual's self-conquest of responsibility, in his acquisition of a sense of objectivity, as well as in a complete form of self-realization. Under such circumstances, one must understand that a genuine man of *Bildung* (*ein Gebildeter*) was ideally to represent some incarnate ideal of humanity. Young Nietzsche's theory and critiques of contemporary education clearly find their own basis in *Bildung*'s original association with an ideal of realized humanity.

In Nietzsche's eyes, german institutions of education, however firmly they may hold to the ideal of *Bildung* as their proper aim, display in reality a tendency towards the construction of encyclopedic culture. This tendency reaches its consummation in what Nietzsche calls *historische Bildung*, an educative model which seems to consider that the proper objective of education consists in the accumulation of historical content. This, however, clearly contradicts *Bildung*'s original claim, that is, to aim exclusively at some revolution in the inner life of the person educated. *Bildung* is not about the individual's erudition, it is about the individual's transformation. According to this perspective, the actual content learned would be of less importance than the effect this content has on the individual who appropriates it. *Historische Bildung* therefore represents, for Nietzsche, a debasement of the ideal's original claim. Under the influence this degraded model exerted on contemporary educational institutions, modern man was gradually transformed into a walking encyclopedia. Nietzsche condemned this primacy given to the assimilation of historical content as detrimental to the intellectual growth of the individual :

Knowledge, consumed for the greater part without hunger for it and even counter to one's needs, now no longer acts as an agent for transforming the outside world but

<sup>1</sup> Here, I translate *Bildung* as culture, which is one of the common english terms of translation (culture, education, edification), because *historische Bildung* has nothing to do with *Bildung* proper for the young Nietzsche.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Educating Humanity : Bildung in Postmodernity*, Edited by Lars Løvlie, Klaus Peter Mortensen and Sven Erik Nordenbo, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, Preface, p.VII.

remains concealed within a chaotic inner world which modern man describes with a curious pride as his uniquely characteristic inwardness. It is then said that one possesses content and only form is lacking; but such an antithesis is quite improper when applied to living things. This precisely is why our modern culture [*Bildung*] is not a living thing: it is incomprehensible without recourse to that antithesis; it is not a real culture at all but only a kind of knowledge about culture.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche thought that a tendency towards the development of encyclopedic culture would not only leave the real *Bildungsprozess* – the actual transformation and unfolding of individual identity – in the background, but might very well arouse in the individual an aversion for everything intellectual, branded in advance as foreign and uninteresting. Here, we meet Nietzsche's main objection to the rising threat of *historische Bildung*: it forfeits the ideal's original involvement with the inner life of the person educated, and therefore debases *Bildung* to the point where it can be confused with mere cultural erudition.

One should note, however, that historical culture is simply one of Nietzsche's many targets. In fact, erudition in general is frequently the main object of Nietzsche's early critiques. As was said earlier, *Bildung* retained its original ties to natural philosophy in the inherited veneration for all things natural proper to thinkers like Herder and Humboldt. Nietzsche's metaphor of modern human beings as walking encyclopedias merely gives the first traces of an enduring critique which extends over the totality of Nietzsche's productive life, a critique which often equates scholarly education with an anti-natural kind of education. This association between the scholarly, the unhealthy and the unnatural is frequently expressed in Nietzsche's later writings, where the external aspect of the scholar becomes an indication of the state of his intellectual life. His rounded shoulders and blunted eyesight are merely the outer signs of a form of artificial corruption which infects him to his core and strains his dulled mind. One can already find a foretaste of this critique in the second *Untimely Meditation*:

Then there appears the repulsive spectacle of a blind rage for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed. Man is encased in the stench of must and mould; through the antiquarian approach he succeeds in reducing even a more creative disposition, a nobler desire, to an insatiable thirst for novelty, or rather for antiquity and for all and everything; often he sinks so low that in the end he is content to gobble down any food whatever, even the dust of bibliographical minutiae.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the necessities of the profession are represented as sources of the corruption of the scholar's taste. This kind of critique readily sounds gratuitous. This is why I propose we turn for a moment to Schopenhauer's critique of abstract knowledge, a perspective which made a deep impression on young Nietzsche's thought and which might help us invest some justifiable meaning in those offensive lines.

For Nietzsche's mentor, all original knowledge stems from imaginative perception: knowledge articulated in concepts is of a derivative nature and obtains its truth second hand, from that of perception. From this insight, Schopenhauer launches a powerful critique of learned culture which culminates in a disdain for scholarly thought rarely to be seen. When knowledge comes to communication through the sole medium of the concept, it is severed from the source through which the concept acquires its truth, therefore duplicating itself in the mind of the receiver as pure abstraction. This brings Schopenhauer to deem superior the task of communication when it effectively summons imaginative thought to assist the concept in reacquiring its truth. Of authors who succeed at bringing

<sup>3</sup> *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, Trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, p. 75.

back the concept to its perceptive roots in the minds of their readers, Schopenhauer says that they think in the presence of perception. Books, however, are seldom worth the paper they are printed on for the notorious pessimist, and therefore the process of learning through books usually becomes a process through which abstract, unperceptive knowledge is accumulated in the mind of the reader. The knowledge thus accumulated always deals with the universal: a fact which becomes a paradox when one goes in search of the universal in the world and finds nothing but the particular.

... for the man who studies to gain insight, books and studies are merely rungs of the ladder on which he climbs to the summit of knowledge. As soon as a rung has raised him one step, he leaves it behind. On the other hand, the many who study in order to fill their memory do not use the rungs of the ladder for climbing, but take them off and load themselves with them to take away, rejoicing at the increasing weight of the burden. They remain below forever, because they bear what should have borne them.<sup>5</sup>

Schopenhauer does recognize some uses to abstract knowledge – in some situations, he grants, it is more appropriate than knowledge from perception. However, the core of the problem emerges when, through exclusive intercourse with abstract knowledge about the universal, the scholar loses the power of imaginative thinking which is the hallmark of superlative thought. The scholarly mind thus comes to relate to the book as Pavlov's dog does to the bell: the main difference being that the dog does not salivate *about* the bell. If great thinkers reflect in the presence of perception, then it can be said of the scholar that he thinks only in the presence of the book – and about the book.

Therefore, while the correct apprehension of the world of perception has impressed the stamp of insight and wisdom on the brow of many an unlearned man, the face of many a scholar bears no other traces of his many studies than those of exhaustion and weariness through excessive and forced straining of the memory for the unnatural accumulation of dead concepts. Such a man frequently looks so simple, silly and sheepish, that it must be supposed that the excessive strain of the indirect faculty of knowledge, applied to the abstract, produces a direct weakening of the immediate knowledge of perception and that the natural and correct view is dazzled more and more by the light of books.<sup>6</sup>

The fundamental flaw Schopenhauer sees in scholarly education seems to be that, through the exclusive devotion to the kind of learning one gathers from books, a more fundamental power in the subject dries up and perishes. Exclusive devotion to abstract knowledge thus becomes, for Schopenhauer, self-defeating. In renouncing imaginative thinking, one renounces the only means able to create novel abstract knowledge, since only from perception does knowledge come, according to Schopenhauer. Scholarly education therefore condemns the individual to perpetually chew on the same facts and the same thoughts, without progress and without invention.

Young Nietzsche visibly feeds on some of Schopenhauer's bitter remarks about scholarly education: in fact, Nietzsche seems to turn his mentor's original attacks against the primacy of abstract knowledge into attacks against the paradigmaticity of the scholar as an ideal of human realization. This *ad hominem* turn to the polemic stems from a tacit identification between the man of great erudition (*Gelehrter*) and the man of *Bildung* (*Gebildeter*) Nietzsche sees expressed in the educative system of his time.

Our whole modern world is caught in the net of Alexandrian culture [*Cultur*], and the

<sup>5</sup> *The World as Will and Representation*, Trans. E. F. J. Payne, Dover, New York, volume II, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *The World as Will and Representation*, Trans. E. F. J. Payne, Dover, New York, volume II, p. 78.

highest ideal it knows is *theoretical man*, equipped with the highest powers of understanding and working in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates. The original aim of all our means of education is to achieve this ideal; every other form of existence has to fight its way up alongside it, as something permitted but not intended. It is almost terrifying to think that for a long time the man of culture [*der Gebildete*] was to be found here in the guise of the man of learning [*des Gelehrten*].<sup>7</sup>

Although German Gymnasiums, Universities and Academies all claim to aim at *Bildung* as their ultimate end, Nietzsche thinks their outward activities reveal a totally different objective : as a whole, the contemporary educative process is oriented towards the production of the scholar. In the Gymnasium of Nietzsche's Germany, this intention to make scholars of men is made explicit, on the one hand in the part played by the historical sciences in the education of the youth, and on the other, in the generally theoretical nature of the instruction. However, an institution which claims to aim at *Bildung* and makes scholars out of men can be doing one of two things for Nietzsche: either it claims to endorse standards it does not attempt to meet and is therefore engaged in a remarkable piece of educational hypocrisy, or it purports to present the type of the scholar as a paradigmatical type of realized humanity. Nietzsche himself does not seem to know how one should interpret this inconsistency, and he therefore sets out to both condemn the educational institutions of his time as hypocritical and to critique the type of the scholar as an alleged ideal of human development and total self-realization. The *ad hominem* flavour of Nietzsche's critiques of scholarly education can therefore be justified by appealing to the fact that one *needs* to deal with types of persons here. If *Bildung* stands for an education aiming at the production of mature and complete individuality, then to reveal the process actually taking place as inauthentic *Bildung* is to engage in a critique of the kind of individual this process does, in fact, produce. In other words, if some kind of education produces sickly, unidimensional and unhappy human beings, then it can be debunked as an inappropriate type of education.

We already have access to blocks of the argument Nietzsche aims at the scholar: the extensive culture of the scholar is not synonymous with the inner transformation of sensibility and character which should necessarily attend real *Bildung*. Encyclopedic culture as such can leave the inner life of the individual unaffected, as does the rote learning of a medicine student preparing for tomorrow's exam. To this distinction between culture and *Bildung*, we may add Nietzsche's endorsement of the schopenhauerian perspective, according to which a too great accumulation of abstract knowledge may have a detrimental effect on the vitality of the individual's intellectual life. Nietzsche, however, adds to the schopenhauerian argument a concern for the increasing one-sidedness of scholarly erudition. In the past, being learned may have legitimately represented an ideal of human achievement, especially when the sum of knowledge was much smaller. This fact allowed the existence of polymaths like Leonardo Da Vinci or Leibniz. However, as the sum of human knowledge grows exponentially, so does the division between the various branches tending to this knowledge. The scholarly man therefore needs to turn, in the modern world, towards a single corner in the colossal treasury of human knowledge and focus exclusively on his own speciality in order to be of use :

If, in his specialization, he stands over the *Vulgus*, he nevertheless belongs to it in every other respect, that is, in all things important. Such a scholar resembles the shop worker who devotes his life to making some kind of screw or handle designed for a precise tool or machine, a task at which he comes to excel. [...] For centuries one took as self-evident that, thinking of the cultivated man [*Gebildeten*], one thought of the scholar and

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 86.

the scholar only; contemporary experience, however, does not entitle us to such a naive identification. The exploitation of a man in the name of science is now a principle accepted everywhere: who still asks what value has a science which uses its servants as would a vampire?<sup>8</sup>

Through his instrumentalization by science, the scholar does not differ fundamentally from the hyper-specialized worker anymore. One can indeed wonder how exactly the meticulous work of the philologist – engaged in numbering the occurrences of the epithet *antitheos* in Homer's *Odyssey* – would be involved in the total cultivation of his own being if the same cannot be said of the farmer tending to his field. In a world in which division of work rules over scientific disciplines, science's claim to promote total cultivation of the human soul loses much of its credibility. As a specialized instrument of science, the scholar is therefore subjected to a fate similar to that of the working man: he is condemned to remain forever chained to his speciality in the midst of the gigantic manufacture of science. If the scholar indeed represents an ideal of human realization, then modern man appears to be thoroughly doomed by scientific and technological progress to become increasingly unidimensional. Now, the gradual subdivision of all scientific knowledge may very well be essential to the smooth gyration of the whole scientific mechanism, but Nietzsche thinks this inescapable fact must not blind us to this other fact: that it is through the progressive instrumentalization of human beings that this smoothness is acquired.

This might all seem beside the point, since education itself is usually thought to cover only a small part of human existence – childhood and pre-professional life – and science proper only makes demands on human beings who are already engaged in science *as* their professional life. In other words, the unidimensional reality of modern scientific research only makes claims on individuals who have already chosen this path and who may have already benefited from an all-around education earlier in their lives. General education is the necessary background to any scholar's academic specialization. This, however, is where the nietzschean perspective diverges from our ordinary ways to think about education. To think of education as a necessary process in the development of individual human beings is not only to think of education as a gateway to the modern realm of labor, but also to think of it as a process essential to the development of the individual *qua* individual, of the human being *qua* human being. Nietzsche's account capitalizes on this fundamental role of education with regards to intellectual growth and on *Bildung's* original vocation, that is, complete cultivation of the human soul. This vocation may lead the contemporary eye to simply brand the concept of *Bildung* as an unrealistic ideal whenever it ventures beyond elementary school and high school education into collegial and professional life. According to such a point of view, education is indeed necessary to the harmonious development of individuals and human beings, but only to a point: until one crosses the threshold of physical and intellectual maturity. Education geared towards the securing of a profession needs not be decried so long as this process of specialization only begins once physical and intellectual maturity are reached through some form of general education.

<sup>8</sup> This is my translation. "Wird er nun schon in seinem Fach über dem Vulgus stehen, in allen Übrigen gehört er doch zu ihm, d.h. in allen Hauptsachen. So ein exclusiver Fach gelehrter ist dans dem Fabrikarbeiter ähnlich, der, sein Leben lang, nicht anderes macht als eine bestimmte Schraube oder Handhabe, zu einem bestimmten Werkzeug oder zu einer Maschine, worin er dann freilich eine unglaublich Virtuosität erlangt. [...] Es sind Jahrhunderte vergangen, in denen es sich von selbst verstand, daß man unter einem Gebildeten den Gelehrten und nur den Gelehrten begriff; von den Erfahrungen unserer Zeit aus würde man sich schwerlich zu einer so naive Gleichstellung veranlaßt fühlen. Denn jetzt ist die Ausbeutung eines Menschen zu Gunsten den Wissenschaften die ohne Anstand überall angenommene Voraussetzung: wer fragt sich doch, was eine Wissenschaft werth sein mag, die so vampyrartig ihre Geschöpfe verbraucht?" *Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungs-Anstalten*, Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe, Bd.1, De Gruyter, 1999, p.669-670

Nietzsche restlessly resisted this pull exerted by modern reality on the ideal meaning congealed in the concept of *Bildung*. Education was, for him, truly what was originally intended in the *Bildungsideal*: the means through which the individual and humanity itself should raise beyond their existing forms : a qualitative jump beyond the human and the actual. The quest for *Bildung* thus represents the first manifestation of a quest for a higher, nobler and more perfect humanity which will receive, in works such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, its definitive form. Although Nietzsche's critique engages – with the concept of *Bildung* – the scholar on an explicitly educative ground, it clearly extends beyond what we usually consider educative grounds. One needs to insist, however, on the fact that, in his assault against the man of erudition, Nietzsche does not commit a crime unprecedented in the philosophical tradition. Heraclitus' famous principle "Great learning does not teach understanding" introduced a distinction in educational thought between a form of learning which, although extensive, is merely accessory and superficial and another, through which a fundamental change occurs in the individual. The idea of *Bildung* was constituted – in all its incarnations – through this opposition to a form of education thought to be at best a simple tool for the individual, and at worst, a corruption of his inner being.